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# Parent Factor

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## AB86 Cyberbullying: Can Common Sense and Decency Be Legislated?

By Joanna Jullien

Among the new California laws impacting minors in effect for 2009 is AB86, which addresses on-line bullying during school hours or school-related activities. This legislation gives schools the authority to suspend or expel students engaged in such activity. According to a press release from the office of Assemblyman Tim Lieu (D-Torrence), who authored AB86, the advent of chat rooms and social networking sites have made "bullying more commonplace", and the results of "internet torment can be fatal".

Sergeant John Weaver with the Placer County Sheriff's office has witnessed cyberbullying as a common occurrence. According to Weaver, in the past children and parents would contact law enforcement because of electronic bullying in one form or another and about 95-98% of this bullying was not a crime. "[The] Internet is today's social club for kids. And man do they loose their inhibitions when using it," said Weaver. Inspiration for this law comes in large part from the famous case in Missouri where a 13-year-old girl, Megan Meier, killed herself in October 2006 after some people she knew had created a fictitious profile of a love interest and used this fake personality to engage her and then dump her. Worse than the cruelty of the hoax, there was national public outrage that it was not a crime. Granite Bay parent, Christi Benz, agrees that it is time to deal with cyberbullying. "I think that kids especially feel that they are anonymous if they are not saying something directly to someone's face," said Benz, "With the rise in chat room usage, MySpace, Facebook, etc. this is a real issue that will need to be addressed."

New laws are passed each year to correct what is unacceptable, immoral or unsafe behavior, and yet some things cannot be legislated. In 2004, my son's 8th grade classmate killed himself. And the conversations about "why?" centered on grades and expectations parents have of their children. I had to explain to my son that the reason why someone takes

this or her own life is because of a loss of all hope and inability to see problems as temporary, not because of one particular reason (grades, bullying, bad break up, cut from the team, etc.). Not surprisingly, according to news reports, Meier was also a very troubled teenager who was taking medication for ADD and depression, in addition to a history of being a victim of bullying. While Meier's personal issues do not exonerate the outrageously mean-spirited conduct of the perpetrators of the hoax, it does shed light on this incident so we can deal in truth. Crossing the street and driving a car can also have fatal results.

While AB86 provides disciplinary sanctions to help school administrators maintain standards of civilized conduct on campus, no amount of legislation or education code can take the place of common sense and decency. Parents are key. In addition to disciplinary codes, lessons at home are important. For example, three rules of thumb below come to mind.

**Treat others, as you would want to be treated.** Once you have demonized someone, then it is too easy to justify hurtful actions because there is no compassion for the demonized individual "targeted" for harassment.

**Try not to bring others into your disputes.** It is human nature to nurture a drama, and all too often a villain is created in order to sustain and escalate the drama, which is easily facilitated with on-line social networks, email and texting.

**Never hit the send button unless you feel confident your mother would be proud.** Whatever we publish cannot be taken back and we have no control over who reads it once it leaves our screen.

